

# Exit Only or Revolving Doors: Student mobility to and from non-Texas public schools and non-district charters

Daniel Potter, Ph.D., Katharine Bao, Ph.D., & Camila Cigarroa Kennedy, B.A.

May 2021

Every year, thousands of students leave traditional, Houston-area public schools for private schools, homeschools, or non-district charter schools. Some of these students eventually return to the public school setting. To investigate this phenomenon of “returners,” we followed two types of leavers in a cohort of Houston-area students to see if and when they return. First, we followed students who left the Texas public school system (TPSS) entirely. Because these students left TPSS entirely, it was not clear where they went (i.e., private schools, schools in other states), and only one-third of these leavers returned and stayed in Texas public schools. Second, we followed students who left traditional public schools for non-district charter schools. Since charter schools in Texas are public schools, we were able to follow leavers, and found that nearly 60 percent of these leavers eventually returned to and stayed at a traditional public school. Understanding that certain types of mobility function as a “revolving door” between educational entities has implications for how schools inform, serve, and support their students and families.

## Key Terms

*Houston area* – a selection of public school districts serving students within the City of Houston and surrounding areas.

*TPSS leavers* – students who left the Texas public school system (TPSS) entirely to enter private schools, homeschool, out-of-state-schools, etc.

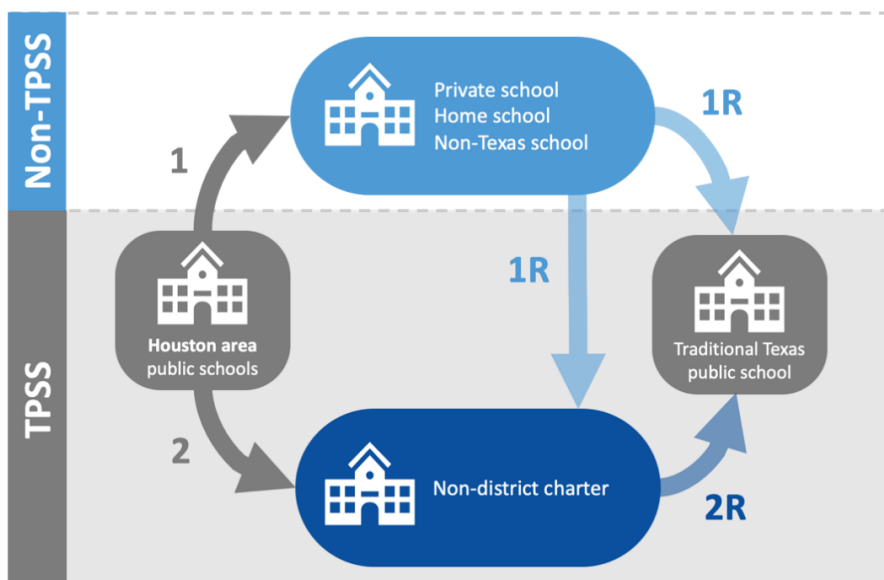
*TPSS returners* – students who left TPSS and subsequently re-entered a TPSS school (including TPSS charter schools) in Texas.

*Non-district charter leavers* – students who left traditional public schools to enter a public, non-district charter school in Texas.

*Non-district charter returners* – students who left for non-district charter schools and subsequently returned to a traditional public school in Texas.

*Revolving door* – analogy describing the pattern of students exiting out of and then later returning to a school district

## Illustrated Key Terms



In this figure, the dark grey arrows represent TPSS leavers (1) and non-district charter leavers (2).

The blue arrows represent TPSS returners (1R) and non-district charter returners (2R).

## Key Findings

### For students who left TPSS:

- About 10 percent of Houston-area students left TPSS entirely between 5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade
- Only 32 percent of TPSS leavers re-entered and stayed in Texas public schools

### For TPSS leavers who re-entered and stayed in Texas public schools:

- Almost 75 percent returned to public schools in the Houston area, and more than half returned to their original district
- TPSS leavers most commonly left before middle school and TPSS returners re-entered throughout middle school and early high school

### For students who left to a public, non-district charter school:

- Around 11 percent of Houston-area students left for non-district charter schools between 5<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade
- Nearly 60 percent of non-district charter leavers returned and stayed in traditional public schools

### For non-district charter leavers who returned and stayed in traditional public schools:

- Around 60 percent returned to traditional public schools in the Houston area, but less than half returned to their original district
- Non-district charter leavers most commonly left before middle school and returned during the transition to high school.

## Background

During both the summer and school year, thousands of Houston-area students change schools. Previous briefs in this series showed for every 100 students in the Houston area, 31 students left their school for another over the summer (Potter et al., 2020), and 11 left their school during the school year (Potter et al., 2019). While many students left to attend another school in their district, others left to attend non-Texas public school system (TPSS) schools or non-district charter schools. Some of these students eventually return to traditional public schools, and they must reintegrate into the environment and curriculum. Districts are held accountable for subsequent student performance, advancement, and graduation of these returners. The purpose of this brief is to help districts understand the prevalence of returners in the Houston area and understand the timing of when they re-enter a Texas public school

## Research Questions

This brief follows the same cohort of students over an eight-year period to answer the following questions:

1. What percent of students left TPSS schools? What percent left for non-district charters?
2. Of TPSS leavers, what percent of students returned to TPSS and stayed? Of non-district charter school leavers, what percent returned to traditional public schools and stayed?
3. If a leaver returned, where did they return to?
4. If a leaver returned, when (i.e., what grade) did they return?

To answer these questions, nearly 50,000 fifth-grade students belonging to 10 Houston-area public school districts were followed from the 2010-11 school year through the beginning of the 2017-18 school year, when most students would have been in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Two groups of leavers were identified: 1) TPSS leavers were identified if a student was missing Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) attendance data for any six-week period and 2) non-district charter leavers were identified if a student left a traditional public school to go to a non-district charter school in Texas. TPSS leavers and non-district charter leavers were considered in separate analyses.

# I.

## Houston area students who left the Texas public school system (TPSS)

*Of the 10 percent of students who left TPSS schools entirely between 5th and 9th grade, half returned, but only one-third returned and stayed. About half of the TPSS leavers who returned came back to their original district. TPSS returners showed up throughout middle school and early high school.*

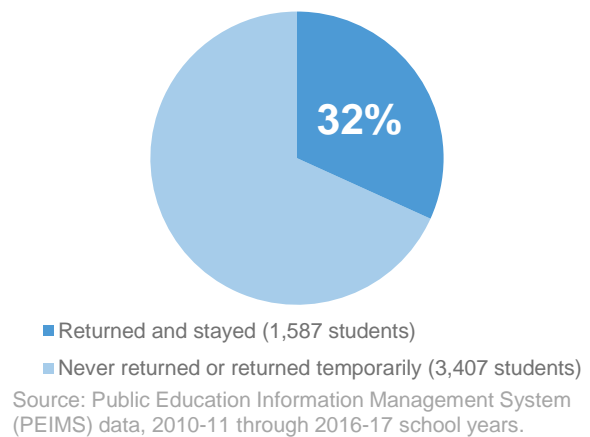
Ten percent of the 2010-11 fifth-grade cohort (about 5,000 students) left TPSS for private schools, homeschool, or out-of-state schools at some point prior to the 2013-14 school year. This analysis only counts students who left TPSS before 9<sup>th</sup> grade to avoid conflating a TPSS leaver with dropping out of high school.

Half of TPSS leavers re-entered the system at some point, but only one-third re-entered TPSS and stayed through at least the beginning of 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Figure 1).

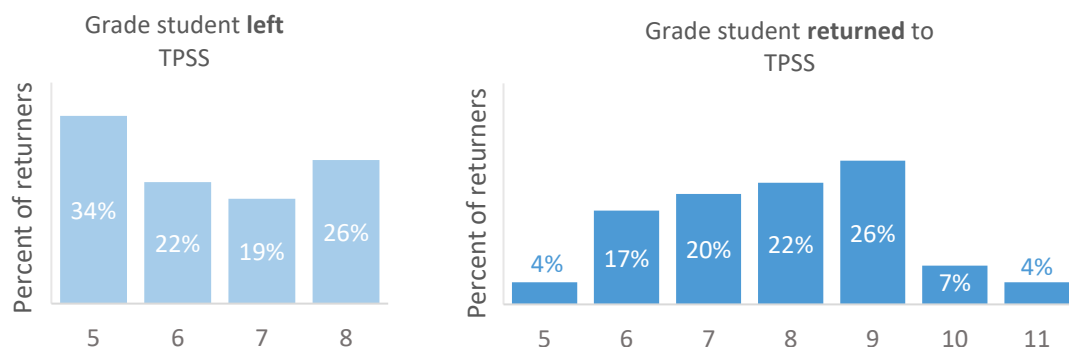
Among students that returned to TPSS and stayed, three-quarters re-entered a public school in the Houston area (vs. a public school somewhere else in Texas), but only about half of the TPSS returners went back to the original district they departed. TPSS returners also included students enrolled at Texas charter schools, since these are public schools, after having exited TPSS entirely.

Students who left TPSS tended to leave during the year prior to middle school or the year prior to high school (Figure 2). For TPSS leavers who subsequently returned, 9<sup>th</sup> grade was the most common re-entry year, although the majority returned during middle school.

**Figure 1. How many TPSS leavers returned and stayed in a Texas public school?**



**Figure 2. When do students leave TPSS and when do they return?**



## II.

### Houston area students who left for non-district charter schools

*Of the 11% of students who left for non-district charter schools between 5th and 12th grade, nearly 60% returned to traditional public schools and stayed. Despite the majority of non-district charter leavers returning and staying, less than half returned to their original district. Most commonly, non-district charter returners came back during the transition to high school.*

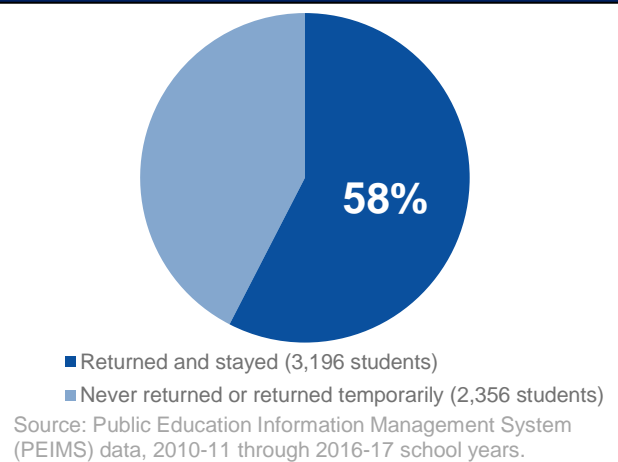
Eleven percent of the 2010-11 fifth-grade cohort (about 5,550 students) transferred from a traditional, Houston-area public school to a non-district charter school prior to their senior year.

About 62 percent of non-district charter leavers returned to traditional public schools at some point, and slightly fewer returned and stayed. Specifically, 58 percent of non-district charter leavers returned to a traditional public school somewhere in Texas and stayed through 12<sup>th</sup> grade (**Figure 1**).

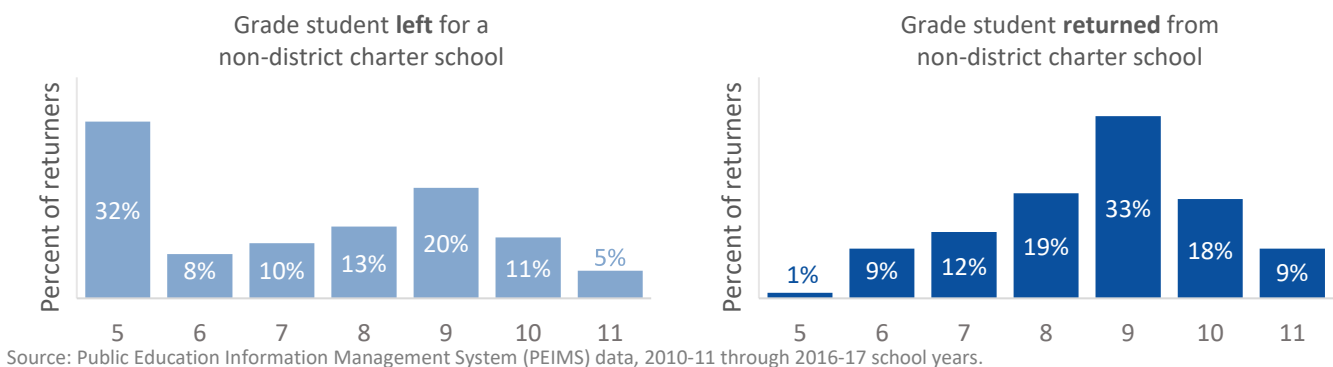
Despite the percentage of non-district charter leavers who returned, only 57 percent came back to Houston area public schools and less than half (44 percent) returned to their original district. Non-district charter leavers were more likely than not to return to a traditional public school setting at some point, but they were unlikely to return to the district they left.

Most often, non-district charter leavers withdrew in the year before middle school (i.e., during 5th grade or the following summer). The most common point of re-entry for non-district returners was 9th grade: nearly one-third of non-district charter returners came back at that time (**Figure 2**).

**Figure 3. How many non-district charter school leavers returned to traditional public schools and stayed?**



**Figure 4. When do students leave, and when do they return?**



## Summary

Depending on where a student enrolled after they changed schools, their departure from traditional public schools may have been an exit only or introduced the student to a type of revolving door mobility. For TPSS leavers, only half ever returned to a public school at some point, and only about one-third returned and stayed. In contrast, the majority of non-district charter leavers eventually returned to a traditional public school setting with most returning and staying. Houston-area students who left TPSS altogether were unlikely to return, and students who left for non-district charters entered a revolving door that eventually placed them back in traditional public schools.

However, the charter school revolving door did not typically put students back in the district they left. Instead, charters appear to often serve as a stepping stone between school districts. While fewer of them returned, TPSS returners were more likely to enroll in a Houston-area public school and a school in their original district.

## Implications

### **Consequences of the revolving door between traditional public schools and charter schools in Texas**

Thousands of non-district charter students return to traditional public schools in the Houston area each year, and public school districts are held accountable for subsequent student performance, advancement, and graduation. While students in non-district charter schools perform on par with their peers in traditional public schools in math and reading, they are less likely to graduate high school on time (Zimmer et al., 2009). Additionally, there is the potential disruption of not only changing schools or districts, but changing between different educational models or structures. The revolving door between traditional public schools and non-district charters may point to a need for greater continuity between these educational entities to ensure that as students return to the traditional public school setting, they are receiving support in the areas of academic performance and on-time graduation.

Additional research is needed to understand the consequences to student learning and attainment of going through the revolving door between traditional public schools and non-district charters. Further insight may provide further justification for alignment between traditional public schools and non-district charters.

### **Preparation for students' return**

Efforts to create better alignment between traditional public schools and non-district charters may be a long-term effort. Schools can put into place reorientation strategies, such as student-led welcoming committees or monitoring systems to ensure students are successfully adjusting. A pattern of many students returning to the Houston area, but not their original district, further justifies exploring data sharing agreements across districts and non-district charters. Granting schools immediate access to students' information from their previous schools to understand what supports, services, programs, and special interventions a student requires would better facilitate a student's return.

## Works Cited

- Potter, D., Alvear, S., Bao, K., Kennedy, C., & Min, J. (2020). *Changing Schools, Part 1: Student Mobility During the Summer Months in Texas and the Houston Area*. Houston Education Research Consortium.
- Potter, D., Alvear, S., Bao, K., & Min, J. (2019). *Changing Schools, Part 2: Student Mobility During the School Year in Texas and the Houston Area*. Houston Education Research Consortium.
- Zimmer, R. W., Gill, B., Booker, K., Lavertu, S., Sass, T. R., & Witte, J. (2009). *Charter schools in eight states: Effects on achievement, attainment, integration, and competition*. RAND.

**Suggested citation.** Potter, D., Bao, K., & Kennedy, C.C. (2021). *Exit Only or Revolving Door: Student mobility to and from non-Texas public schools and non-district charters*. Houston, TX: Houston Education Research Consortium, Kinder Institute for Urban Research, Rice University

**About HERC.** Focusing on the most pressing challenges facing the region, the Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) is a research-practice partnership between Rice University and 11 Houston-area school districts. HERC aims to improve the connection between education research and decision making for the purpose of equalizing outcomes by race, ethnicity, economic status, and other factors associated with inequitable educational opportunities.



**Houston Education Research Consortium**  
**A program of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research**  
Rice University | 713-348-2532  
herc@rice.edu | Find us online: herc.rice.edu